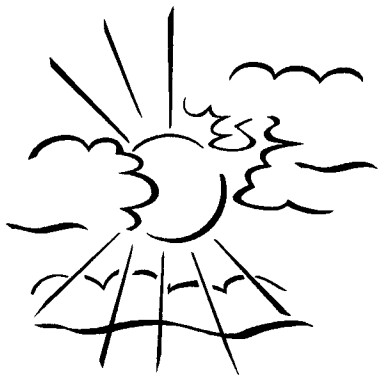


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Articles in Today's Clips

Friday, August 19, 2005

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

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State Senate to hold hearing on foster parents with criminal pasts

8/18/2005, 6:07 p.m. ET

The Associated Press

MLIVE

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — A state senator plans to hold a hearing on the state's oversight of foster care after state auditors found more than 350 people living with foster children had criminal pasts.

The audit said the state Department of Human Services could not show that caseworkers did required background checks on some foster care providers.

Sen. Bill Hardiman, a Kentwood Republican and chair of the Senate Families and Human Services Committee, said Thursday he will hold a hearing when the Senate returns from its summer break to determine if legislation or heightened oversight of the department is needed.

"Pure and simple, the findings of this audit are unacceptable," Hardiman said in a statement.

He said the one purpose of the hearing will be to find out if the problem is sloppy departmental management or whether it's more systemic.

A report released Wednesday by the Michigan Office of the Auditor General found 321 foster care providers and 32 other adults living with foster children had criminal convictions that should have prevented the state from placing foster children with them.

In a randomly selected group of 16 foster care providers with criminal records, auditors said the Department of Human Services could not show that caseworkers did the required background checks on 12. Among those 12, auditors found five drug convictions, five assaults, including one with a weapon, and two convictions for domestic violence.

Auditors were particularly critical of the department for failing to get periodic updates on the criminal backgrounds of foster care licensees who are related to their foster children.

On the Net:

Sen. Bill Hardiman: <http://www.senate.michigan.gov/gop/senator/hardiman/>

Office of the Auditor General, <http://audgen.michigan.gov/>

Department of Human Services, <http://www.michigan.gov/dhs>

MIRS

August 19, 2005

Hardiman Holds Hearings On Foster Child Audit

Sen. Bill **HARDIMAN** (R-Kentwood) pledged today a "quick and thorough" review of the state's foster care system after an Auditor General report released Wednesday noted that the Department of Human Services (DHS) failed to run background checks, putting kids in the homes of 350 people with past criminal sexual conduct and assault convictions.

For starters, Hardiman said his Senate Families and Human Services Committee will take up background check bills in the not-too-distant future. He wants to determine if increased legislative oversight is needed over the state agency.

The first-term senator noted that the report showed DHS had not monitored contractors to make sure they were doing what they were paid to do and DHS failed to do their required oversight check-up.

"Pure and simple, the findings of this audit are unacceptable," Hardiman said. "I read that the department said the problems were 'technical' and simply a failure of 'documentation.' The purpose of the hearing will be to determine if this is a problem of departmental disorganization and sloppy management or a much more serious systemic problem."

The Lansing State Journal

August 19, 2005

Senator vows hearing on foster care

A state senator plans to hold a hearing on the state's oversight of foster care after state auditors found that more than 350 people living with foster children had criminal pasts that should have disqualified them.

The audit released Wednesday said the state Department of Human Services could not show that caseworkers performed required background checks on some foster care providers.

Sen. Bill Hardiman, a Kentwood Republican and chair of the Senate Families and Human Services Committee, said Thursday he will hold a hearing when the Senate returns from its summer break to determine if legislation or heightened oversight of the department is needed.

Improved oversight of foster parents needed State study shows many aren't checked

The Ann Arbor News
Friday, August 19, 2005

In June, it was nursing care for the aged. An attorney general's office investigation revealed that hundreds of the state's certified nurse's aides had outstanding criminal warrants for their arrest, while several others had been charged with offenses that would bar them from working in patient care.

Two months later, it's foster care. A review by the Michigan Office of the Auditor General discovered that more than 350 foster parents and other adults living with foster children were convicted of crimes spanning sexual assault, domestic violence and drug possession.

What explains placing two of the state's most vulnerable populations at such risk? In June, we noted some nursing home operators were knowingly allowing people with outstanding warrants or criminal histories to remain employed, while others were unknowingly doing so because of lax laws.

Now, it appears many caseworkers with the state Department of Human Services failed to conduct required criminal background checks on potential foster parents. They failed to perform periodic background checks on foster parents. And the department failed to ensure that its caseworkers performed and documented required visits with foster children, their biological parents and foster parents. According to the Auditor General's review, fully one-third of all visits required of caseworkers had not been completed, which covered 77 local DHS offices and 29 foster-care agencies from Oct. 2000 to May 2004.

Legislation is needed requiring periodic background checks. DHS must do a far better job of ensuring that all its caseworkers perform and document required criminal background checks of prospective foster parents. And the department must make certain that caseworkers visit their charges.

DHS says it needs more funding. But the federal government, which funds a majority of the state's foster care system, actually is looking more at ways of holding back its revenues. Thirty-two states, including Michigan, that failed a federal review of their ability to protect children and find them permanent homes stand to lose millions of dollars from Washington - if they don't soon make improvements.

Improvements needn't hinge solely on more funding, however. They don't when it comes to better nursing care, as tougher laws would give nursing homes greater latitude in firing some workers with criminal records than they now have. And they don't with foster care. Better supervision of caseworkers, as stretched as many of them already are by their case loads, would result in greater performance and documentation of criminal background checks. And, so would better training.

Foster care: State should be alarmed, not defensive, about critical audit

Herald Paladium
Thursday, August 18, 2005

In most cases, children placed in foster care already have faced more trauma than any young person ever should see. Often, they have been removed from their home after their parents were abusive or neglectful.

What they need more than anything is a stable, loving environment, and most of the state's thousands of foster parents, we suspect, provide that. It is the state's job to make sure.

But an audit released Wednesday revealed some serious flaws in the system Michigan uses to screen prospective and current foster parents. For the sake of the children placed at risk, the flaws need to be corrected.

The audit found more than 350 foster parents or other adults living with foster children were previously convicted of crimes, including domestic violence, drug possession and sexual assault. Of those, 321 were licensed foster care providers.

State government usually is known for its diligence in following procedures. Try to build a house in wetlands or on a critical dune without going through the numerous (and necessary) steps, and you'll know what we mean. Why is a state that is so careful not to issue a building permit until all the i's have been dotted willing to entrust children to foster parents before all the proper checks have been completed?

We're disappointed that the initial reaction to the audit from the head of the state department responsible for foster parent licensing, Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow, was overly defensive.

Udow pointed out that the presence of criminals in the foster care rolls does not necessarily mean any of the children in those homes were in danger. She said the department can't afford to do periodic background checks after a foster parent's initial background check. She said the state's early retirement programs in 1997 and 2002 caused the department to lose a lot of experienced caseworkers, who were replaced with inexperience employees. She said a new computer system the department will soon start using should take care of some of the paperwork problems.

We have no doubt that DHS's job is complicated by limited funding, and the department did lose a lot of valuable employees to early retirement. But those factors don't excuse the fact that hundreds of criminals are licensed to take care of some of the state's most vulnerable children.

Perhaps the new computer system will help, but Udow owes it to the thousands of foster children in the state to do more than hope a little technology will fix the problems. The issue of periodic background checks, for example, needs serious review by Udow and by the Legislature.

It should be pointed out that for every foster parent with a criminal history, there are hundreds who are dedicated, law-abiding citizens doing a wonderful service. But even

one violent criminal serving as a foster parent is too many. The day one of those convicted foster parents who slipped through the cracks commits a heinous crime against a child in his or her care, it will be much too late for excuses.

(An opinion of The Herald-Palladium editorial board.)

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Man charged in Internet sex sting

August 19, 2005

BY NAOMI R. PATTON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A Plymouth Township man, arrested for allegedly trying to meet a minor for sex, was charged Wednesday with soliciting a minor for sex online, state law enforcement officials said Thursday. Stephen J. Allegrina, 40, was arrested Tuesday in Novi where he had planned to meet the minor he had met online, said Allison Pierce, a spokeswoman for the Michigan Attorney General's Office. Pierce would not say where in Novi Allegrina was arrested. The minor turned out to be an undercover investigator from the Attorney General's Child and Public Protection Unit. Allegrina, a building contractor, was charged in 52nd District Court with one felony count of child sexually abusive activity, which involves soliciting a minor for sex and making arrangements to meet, and one felony count of using a computer to commit a crime. Both charges carry 20-year sentences upon conviction.

Allegrina was also charged with one count of using a computer to distribute obscene matter to a minor. That charge carries a maximum 4-year prison sentence.

He could not be reached at his home for comment.

Allegrina was released from the Oakland County Jail on a \$50,000 bond. He is scheduled to appear at a preliminary examination in 52nd District Court Aug. 24.

Pierce said the Child and Public Protection Unit has arrested close to 50 Internet sexual predators.

The Attorney General's Office has a CyberTipLine at 877-529-2373. The office also has a Web site that offers Internet safety tips for parents and children at www.michigan.gov/ag.

Contact NAOMI R. PATTON at 248-351-3689 or patton@freepress.com.

Friday, August 19, 2005

Wayne Briefs

Detroit News staff reports and wire services

Plymouth

Man charged with child sex abuse

State Attorney General Mike Cox announced Thursday the arrest of a Plymouth contractor for using the Internet to commit child sexual abuse. Investigators arrested resident Stephen Joseph Allegrina, 40, in Novi earlier this week. He was arraigned Wednesday in Novi's 52-1 District Court on one count of child sexually abusive activity and one count of using a computer to commit a crime, both 20-year felonies. His bond was set at \$50,000. He will be back in court at 9:15 a.m. Aug. 24 for a pre-exam conference.

August 18, 2005

Former school official facing six charges

Some crimes could carry a life sentence

By KEITH MATHENY

Record-Eagle staff writer

CHARLEVOIX - Former Char-Em Intermediate School District AmeriCorps administrator Arthur Kirk faces additional felonies for allegedly lying about his criminal past when he purchased handguns.

Kirk, 70, of Charlevoix Township, was arraigned Tuesday in Charlevoix County district court on six charges - possession of a firearm by a felon, making a false statement on a concealed weapons permit application and three perjury counts.

Kirk also was charged as a habitual offender-fourth offense, which could increase penalties for the weapons-related charges to 15 years in prison, or life in prison on the perjury charges, if he is convicted.

Kirk's July 31 arrest created a stir in education and law enforcement circles when it was learned he for years hid his past by changing his name from Arthur Kirkeby. His past included multiple felony convictions downstate, including sex crimes with children.

School district officials said they completed a state police background check on Kirk that turned up no criminal history. Kirk changed his name from Kirkeby in an Ingham County court in 1985, a fact apparently not shared with the state's criminal history database.

Kirk's past as Kirkeby came to light as he applied for a concealed weapons permit and submitted to a required federal fingerprint background check.

Prosecutor John Jarema said the added perjury counts involved Kirk's registration with the local sheriff's department of three handguns he purchased in recent years.

"He got three pistol permits for which he certified that he had never been convicted of a felony," Jarema said.

Kirk is represented by Harbor Springs attorney Jennifer Deegan. A preliminary examination is set for Sept. 13 in Charlevoix district court. Kirk is free on \$10,000 bond that includes conditions that he not possess a weapon or be in contact with anyone under the age of 16.

Bill gets tough on pedophiles

Friday, August 19, 2005

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LANSING -- Midland Republican state Sen. Tony Stamas has introduced legislation that would let judges sentence adults who sexually assault children younger than 13 to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

"This is an issue we need to be perfectly clear on -- if you commit a sex crime against a child you will pay for it," Stamas said.

To get the stiffer sentence for a first-degree criminal sexual assault of a child younger than 13, prosecutors would need to show one of the following: an injury; use of a weapon, force or coercion; or that the perpetrator held a position of authority.

Someone convicted of first-degree criminal sexual conduct now faces up to life in prison. Stamas said there are too many horror stories of convicted pedophiles who are released and again prey on children.

"The recidivism rate is unparalleled," he said. "We must make it perfectly clear to these sexual predators who violate children that the first time you do this in Michigan, you will go to prison for life without a chance of parole."

'Grandpa' rescues wandering toddler

Friday, August 19, 2005

By Nate Reens

The Grand Rapids Press

WYOMING -- Others might have kept driving, but Robert Ciucci knew if he did, a family could be mourning a child's death today.

When the 61-year-old Siemans Dematic employee spotted a pair of eyes alongside 44th Street SW early Thursday on his way to work, he thought he was seeing a doll.

"Then, I saw her arms out and I knew if I didn't do something right away, something awful was going to happen," said Ciucci, of Grand Rapids. "A driver would feel awful, and a family would be without a child."

Ciucci pulled his car onto Pinehurst Avenue and ran toward the girl, a 2-year-old who was between the busy road's curb and sidewalk about 5:15 a.m.

Telling her to "come to Grandpa," Ciucci picked up the girl, likely saving her from injury or worse, police said.

The girl, identified only as Amelia by police, managed to escape her crib and walk out of her nearby home undetected sometime early Thursday, Wyoming Police and Fire Services Chief Ed Edwardson said.

The toddler then walked along 44th Street, where Ciucci caught a glimpse of her in his headlights.

"This could have turned out to be a horrible situation if not for that motorist seeing her, then doing the right thing," the chief said. "He was very observant, and I can't say enough about what he did."

"Many people would have kept right on going."

Edwardson said he would send Ciucci a letter of commendation for his efforts.

Police don't anticipate charging the girl's family in the incident. Authorities turned the girl over to child-protection workers, who later reunited her with her family, the chief said.

Child Protective Services continues to investigate and will turn their results over to authorities.

"It appears innocent, that there wasn't neglect involved, just that this girl somehow managed to get out of her house," Edwardson said. "(Her mother) called 911 to inform us that her daughter was missing about an hour after she was found. She was frantic."

Thursday's incident is similar to one four years ago when a Wyoming 2-year-old used chairs and a table to reach a bedroom window and pop out a screen, crawling out of her grandparents' home. She was found by a passerby on 36th Street SW, also uninjured.

No criminal charges were brought in that case.

Ciucci said he did what anyone would have.

"My wife's always said I'm good at spotting animals in the dark, but I'm really thankful that I saw this before she got hurt," he said. "You just don't see a little kid at that time in the morning and do nothing."

Toddler, Dog Found Wandering Reunite With Family

Mom Called 911 To Report Missing Child

POSTED: 8:05 am EDT August 18, 2005

UPDATED: 3:01 pm EDT August 18, 2005

A 3-year-old girl who was found wandering at a stranger's home in Highland Township early Thursday morning was reunited with her family.

The child's family plans to install extra deadbolt locks on their doors and window alarms to prevent her from escaping again, Local 4 learned.

The girl, named Shania (pictured, right), was found in the 3500 block of Maple Ridge at about 2:45 a.m. Thursday, carrying her yellow Labrador puppy named "Reno," Local 4 reported.

A woman was watching television in her living room when she heard her screen door open, looked up, and discovered the unfamiliar child in her doorway, according to the Oakland County Sheriff's Department. The woman took the child to neighboring homes, but nobody recognized her. The woman then called 911.

The toddler could not say her name and did not know where she lives, sheriff's deputies said. Sheriff's deputies went door to door to locate the toddler's family, according to Sgt. Patrick Hatfield.

Meanwhile, the child's mother, Christine Oliver, returned home from work at about 6:45 a.m. and discovered Shania was missing, Local 4 learned. Oliver works a midnight shift and had left the house at about 10 p.m., the sheriff's department said. Her husband is a long-haul tractor-trailer driver and had left around midnight for a trip east, according to authorities.

Oliver's 14-year-old daughter was supposed to be watching Shania and their brother while their parents were at work, Local 4 reported.

Oliver said she looked around the house, and down the street toward the lake. She said she was "hysterical."

Oliver called 911 for help, and police dispatch connected her story with the child found wandering.

Mom: "Oh my God."

911 Dispatch: "OK. Ma'am. What is your name?"

Mom: "Christine Oliver."

911 Dispatch: "Christine Oliver?"

Mom: "Is she OK?"

911 Dispatch: "Christine, she's fine. She's at our police station."

Shania had been brought to the Highland Township substation of the Oakland County Sheriff's Department. Her mother arrived at the sheriff's station about 7 a.m., according to Local 4.

Shania was taken home by her grandparents, Local 4 reported.

Oliver was scheduled to appear in Oakland County Family Court Thursday afternoon for the Family Independence Agency to determine if Shania could return home following the incident.

"I'm just thankful she's OK," said Oliver. "We live down the road from a lake. So all sort of things went through my mind."

The hearing was canceled and Shania was allowed to return home after authorities found no signs of abuse or neglect at the house, Local 4 learned.

Shania's father was in Canada with his tractor-trailer at the time he heard the news, and returned home to be with his family, according to Local 4.

Shania was discovered approximately one and a quarter miles from her house, according to Local 4.

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Lansing State Journal

August 19, 2005

Missing toddler found after wandering streets

HIGHLAND TWP. - A 3-year-old girl was reunited with her mother Thursday morning after she was found wandering through the streets.

Lt. Dave Pement of the Oakland County Sheriff's Department said the girl was found when she knocked on a stranger's door at about 2:45 a.m. She had a puppy with her named Reno.

The girl's mother told sheriff's deputies that she came home from work Thursday morning to find that the girl had somehow gotten out of the house, Pement said.

The mother, whose husband was out of town, had left her 14-year-old daughter in charge while she was at work, he said.

From wire reports

Tot uninjured after falling two stories

Friday, August 19, 2005

JOE SNAPPER

THE SAGINAW NEWS

A 2-year-old boy escaped serious injury when he tumbled out of an upper floor apartment window "like a skydiver," witnesses told police.

The youngster fell from the second story just after 10 p.m. when a screen gave way at the Sterling Crest apartment complex on Tittabawassee in Carrollton Township, said Police Chief Craig Oatten.

The boy dropped 12 feet, landed face down but was found trying to stand. Doctors at Covenant Medical Center treated and released him Thursday night, Oatten said.

The tot and two other children were pressed against the bedroom window to watch passing lights --probably an airplane --when the window screen gave way, the chief said.

"The kids immediately start screaming, and the uncle, who's in the next room, comes in to see his nephew on the ground," he said.

The 25-year-old uncle was baby-sitting at the children's home, he said.

The 9-year-old boy and 6-year-old girl told police the 2-year-old "fell almost like a skydiver -- with arms and legs out and his body kind of falling down belly first," Oatten said.

Falling in a grassy patch at the complex, 1327 Tittabawassee, the child missed a concrete patio by a foot, Oatten said.

"It was just luck I guess," the chief said. "It was due to his age, I guess. He just missed an air conditioning unit on a concrete pad that might have done some injury."

Taking a ride in back seat saves children's lives

Friday, August 19, 2005

By John Agar
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Before Julie Johnson takes her three children anywhere, they are buckled in booster seats -- in the back seat.

"In our vehicle, with air bags in the front, we know the air bags can do more damage to a child at a young age than they help," said Johnson, of Grand Rapids Township.

"I guess we're just safety-conscious people."

A recent study showed Johnson and her husband, Brian, are taking the right steps to safeguard their children, 8-year-old Celine and 5-year-old twins Gavin and Emma while riding in their Ford Windstar minivan.

Front-seat fatalities involving children have declined since 1996 as adults have become more aware that youngsters are safer in the back seat wearing seat belts.

Fatalities involving children 12 and younger in the front seat dropped 46 percent from 1996 to 2003, according to a study released this week by the Air Bag & Seat Belt Safety Campaign of the National Safety Council. The number of such deaths during that time declined from 586 to 314.

The private safety group found the overall number of child fatalities in vehicles slid 18 percent during the same period.

The study examines progress made since 1996, when the government and safety groups became concerned about child fatalities involving air bags, which peaked at 31 deaths in 1997. It appears in the upcoming issue of the National Safety Council's Journal of Safety Research.

Grand Rapids Police Sgt. Steve LaBrecque, who investigates the city's worst crashes, said children stood a better chance of avoiding serious injury or death by riding in the back seat, properly secured. He said most parents have gotten that message.

Those who fail to buckle their children into safety seats, as required by state law, can be ticketed by police. It is a civil infraction with a fine determined by the court.

CONTINUED

Taking a ride in back seat saves children's lives

Page 2 of 2

Still, LaBrecque said, education needs to continue about putting children in the back seat, because, "unfortunately, some people in the community don't think that way."

That, despite efforts by the Greater Grand Rapids Safe Kids Coalition and other agencies designed to keep kids safe.

"We'll advise that kids are much safer riding in the back seat," Safe Kids coordinator Melinda Howard said.

For some, sitting in the front seat is a rite of passage. Others do not think about it, or have no choice because of space limitations in a vehicle.

Howard's organization is trying to "change behaviors" of parents, so they will recognize it is important to buckle up children in the back seat.

It was not always that way, she said. "When we were young, it was not a big deal to ride in the front seat."

Johnson said her children never asked to sit in front. She told them they risked getting hit by an air bag.

"Our kids know," she said. "They'll point it out to us if they ever see anyone: 'Mom, we saw a little kid in the front seat,' or a friend that did it."

Nationwide, authorities say an education campaign is working.

"This is the clearest evidence we've seen that the national public health campaigns begun in 1996 to get children properly restrained in a back seat are working," said Phil Haseltine, executive director of the air bag campaign, a partnership of automakers, insurance companies and safety groups.

Using government data, researchers said there was evidence that restraint use increased among young children, with toddlers between ages 1 and 3 wearing restraints 90 percent of the time, compared with 60 percent in the mid-1990s.

Safety advocates said the study represented solid progress, but they stressed the need to teach new parents the safest ways of driving with their children.

"We must never let our guard down," especially with new parents," said NHTSA administrator Jeffrey Runge.

"We need to constantly remind them that kids under 12 always should be properly restrained in the back seat on every trip."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Drowning prevention tips

The Ann Arbor News
Friday, August 19, 2005

Whenever young children are swimming, playing, or bathing in water, make sure an adult is constantly watching them. By definition, this means that the supervising adult should not read, play cards, talk on the phone, mow the lawn, or do any other distracting activity while watching the children.

Never swim alone or in unsupervised places. Teach children to always swim with a buddy. Keep small children away from buckets containing liquid. Be sure to empty buckets when household chores are done.

Never drink alcohol during or just before swimming, boating, or water-skiing.

To prevent choking, never chew gum or eat while swimming, diving, or playing in water.

Learn to swim. Enroll yourself or your children age 4 and older in swimming classes.

Learn CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation). This is particularly important for pool owners and individuals who regularly participate in water recreation.

Do not use air-filled swimming aids such as water wings in place of life jackets or life preservers with children. These can give parents and children a false sense of security.

Check water depth before entering. The American Red Cross recommends a nine-foot minimum for diving or jumping.

Keep a phone near a pool so an emergency call can be made quickly

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Foundation For Aquatic Injury Prevention

Published August 19, 2005

Money on hold for 100 clients of ex-guardian Eaton Co. seeks to provide assistance as criminal inquiry delays payments

By Kelly Hassett
Lansing State Journal

CHARLOTTE - Nearly 100 people can't access their money or must wait weeks for their checks to arrive as authorities continue to investigate former Eaton County court guardian Charles M. Zwick.

The longtime Charlotte attorney, 56, became the subject of a criminal probe after a deceased woman's family accused him of failing to produce \$347,000 from her estate, which he oversaw.

A judge ordered Zwick to repay the money and signed a warrant for his arrest on a contempt of court charge last week. He is in Eaton County Jail on \$400,000 bond and couldn't be reached for comment because the jail does not take messages for inmates.

Now other people - mostly elderly - are affected by the investigation.

The assets of some people Zwick represented have been frozen. Others are waiting to receive federal benefits because the Social Security Administration had to reorganize payments after Zwick was removed as the payee for dozens of people, said Christine Waichunas, Eaton County's new court guardian.

"They haven't had any money in a month, and we don't know how to get them some," she said. She's scrambling to secure emergency funding to help clients pay for everything from medical care to food for their cats.

Meanwhile, Eaton County prosecutors, Charlotte police and the FBI are investigating the more than 150 cases handled by Zwick.

The arrest warrant was issued after Zwick failed to appear at a July 22 probate court hearing. At that hearing, the family of Wilma Southwell - a deceased 92-year-old Lansing woman who had Alzheimer's disease - accused him of closing several of her accounts and never explaining where the money went.

As court guardian, Zwick managed the finances of more than 150 people unable to do so because of medical, physical or other conditions. Many of them receive Social Security benefits or Medicaid.

He was responsible for filing regular reports with the court, but as of June, he was late in filing on about 30 cases, said Mike Kutas, circuit and probate courts administrator.

What's next

- Eaton County court guardian Christine Waichunas is trying to secure emergency funding for nearly 100 people who had Charles M. Zwick as their guardian. Many of their assets are frozen and some federal payments are rescheduled due to the investigation surrounding the 56-year-old Charlotte man, who's in Eaton County Jail on a contempt of court charge.

Meanwhile, people at the Eaton County courthouse are still trying to reconcile the colleague they often called "Charlie" with the man who's now the focus of a criminal investigation.

"He's been arrested, but still there's no light on what really happened," Kutas said. "People are still shocked because nobody could believe Charlie Zwick had it in him.

"We're just kind of waiting for details," he said.

Contact Kelly Hassett at 267-1301 or khasett@lsj.com.

Published August 19, 2005

Holt food bank doubles capacity

New space allows people in need to wait inside garage

By Matt Schoch
Lansing State Journal

HOLT - In past years, the Holt Community Food Bank has had as many as 20 families line up outside some days, waiting for food.

John Busley, president of the bank executive board, said he knew that had to change before winter hit.

Soon, the remodeled food bank will nearly double its capacity, and be able to serve clients more efficiently.

"All along we've wanted to get this done before it gets cold," Busley said. "We want it to be totally sealed up and heated by the end of September."

The food bank is located in the old garage of Holt First Presbyterian Church.

The bank used to share the garage with the church, but after church members built a new shed, they donated the entire garage to the food bank. The combined area is more than 1,100 square feet, as opposed to the food bank's former 635.

"This is mostly for the convenience of the clients," said Holt's Dave Kelly, who volunteers at least once a week at the food bank.

"It will greatly improve the traffic patterns in the facility."

Busley said needy families seek help throughout the year, creating a need for more space.

"Usually at the end of the month, we see an increase in business," said Busley, noting that by then, government assistance has run out.

"That's when we are needed more."

In 2004, the food bank served 115 to 125 families per month. Numbers are down this year, with averages of 95 to 105 per month. Busley hopes the convenience of the receiving area will persuade those who need assistance to make the trip.

Currently, the bank allows only two families at a time to come inside the receiving area, where the food is distributed. The addition will be used almost exclusively for the receiving area, allowing families to come in from the cold.

The food bank raised the nearly \$3,500 that was needed for the project through fundraisers.

The funds paid for drywall, doors and insulation of the new area, among other needs.

The group holds the Feast to Fight Hunger yearly, and earns money by assisting with Michigan State University athletics concessions.

Construction on the project, which has been planned for more than a year, officially began in early June.

Quick facts

- The revamped Holt Community Food Bank is just about done, after freezers are moved and drywall is finished.

- An open house will be held at 4 p.m. Sept. 4. The bank is in the parking lot of Holt First Presbyterian Church, 2021 Aurelius Road.

All labor has been donated by volunteers and local contractors.

"Sometimes we don't have the most skilled workers, but everyone has a lot of energy and enthusiasm," Busley said. "To see it all come together is really kind of cool."

Contact Matt Schoch at 377-1052 or mschoch@lsj.com.

Facility facts

- Hours for the food bank are: 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Monday, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesday and 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. Friday. Clients can make a food order once a month and a bread order once a week.
- To see if you are eligible for service, which is based on income, call Capital Area Community Services in Mason at 676-1065.

Cooking for a cause 'Iron Chef'-style contest benefits food bank

Friday, August 19, 2005

BY LEANNE SMITH
Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Rob Hindley never knew how much coconut could enhance food until it helped him win his first cooking contest Thursday night.

The tropical treat was the "mystery ingredient" that Hindley, chef at Genoa Township's T.W. & Friends, and Scott Swamba, chef at Brighton's Ciao Amici's, had to use in the "Iron Chef" TV show-style contest they went head-to-head in at Gleaners Food Bank of Livingston.

"It threw me for a loop," said Hindley, who defeated Swamba by a mere eight points in the competition. "I had no idea what I was going to do, but I guess coconut can be a pretty versatile ingredient."

Though Hindley was picked first by both the audience and judges, he and Swamba agree the real winner of the evening was the food bank, which organized the event to spur public awareness of the growing number of hungry people in Livingston County.

"This drew out the people and I hope it gives them more of an idea of what Gleaners does for everyone in this community," Swamba said. "Getting more people involved is what we wanted to do."

The 28 nonprofit agencies served by the Livingston food bank are seeing a staggering increase in need, and the Shared Harvest Pantry, an emergency food program located inside Gleaners, also has had a 35 percent increase in the number of people coming in for food this year, said Erica Karfonta, manager of operations. Many of those are first-time users, she said.

"People have a hard time seeing hunger when it's not on the street," Karfonta said. "People are so busy constantly having to do, do, do that they don't realize it unless they run into a hungry person needing food."

Those at the event toured the warehouse and pantry prior to the start of the contest. Volunteers, including friends Darlene Drury, Bev Tasker and Kathy Wolyniak, all of Green Oak Township, were happy to talk about what they do and encourage others to join them.

"It's nice to directly help people, and these are the nicest people you'll ever see," said Drury.

"They're just like you and me, but something just happened to them. So many say that when things are going great someday, they'll come here and help someone else."

Hindley and Swamba, friends and former co-workers at Dearborn's Ritz Carlton, entertained the crowd by creating an appetizer, main course and dessert from a common pantry of meats, fish, vegetables, fruit, grains and spices on outdoor grills in about 30 minutes. They didn't learn about the mystery ingredient until the competition started.

Each course was judged by a panel of five on taste, presentation and use of their coconut.

Livingston County Undersheriff Michael J. Murphy knew the outcome was going to be close when just two points separated the pair on his judging sheet. His nod went to Hindley, though, mostly because of his entree of grilled fresh tuna marinated in coconut milk and ginger and served with mango butter sauce over a bed of mint-infused couscous with fresh asparagus.

"Everything they both cooked was fantastic, but the mint flavor of the couscous was really nice," Murphy said.

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Confused about Medicare's 'Part D'?

Volunteers can help

Friday, August 19, 2005

BY STEPHENIE KOEHN
Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

"I guess I haven't paid much attention," said Liz Williams, 62, of Brighton. "We have company insurance and order our prescriptions by mail, but they're not all cheap. I guess I need to learn about this (Medicare) prescription program."

The program, established under the federal Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003, is confusing to the population that it is designed to help, some critics say. At least one of the largest automotive companies believes the program is so confusing that it is advising its employees not to sign up.

The Area Agency on Aging 1-B, a regional, nonprofit human services agency that is one of the program's critics, intends to help Williams and other Medicare beneficiaries by training volunteer counselors to help them sort through the program's staggering array of options, said Walter Ernst, a Howell senior who sits on the agency's board.

A free training session for Medicare Prescription Assistance Counselors will take place Aug. 31, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the Livingston Educational Service Agency in Howell. The session includes lunch, Ernst said. Volunteers, who should be computer-literate, need not live in Livingston County, he said.

According to Louanne Bakk, director of access and benefits for the agency, older adults trying to decide whether to drop their prescription plans need to know that Plan D is open to everyone who has Medicare. First, the specifics of the plan will not be released, by law, until Oct. 1. It is likely that the premium will be \$33 to \$35 per month, depending on your place of residence and the annual deductible will be approximately \$250. For drugs costs totaling \$250 to \$2,250, the program will pay 75 percent and you will pay 25 percent.

But there's a gap in coverage. From \$2,251 to \$5,100, you pay the entire cost of your prescription medication. From \$5,101 on, the plan picks up approximately 95 percent of costs.

It is likely, Bakk said, that there will be several competing plans, available through competing private companies, including insurance and drug companies. You'll choose based on whether they include the drugs you need, the costs and ease of access.

"This is atrocious legislation," said Jack LaBelle, chairman of the Livingston County Board of Commissioners, referring to the act. "It would take an army of Philadelphia lawyers to figure it out. It is really a mess." LaBelle said he plans to take the training to become a counselor.

The Area Agency on Aging 1-B went on record in 2004 opposing the act, which it said provides limited assistance to older adults in affording and accessing prescription medications. Also, the agency says the program does little to control the growth in drug costs and increases some of the costs to beneficiaries under other parts of the Medicare program. It advocates changes, including eliminating the program's complexity, the coverage gap and the premium penalty for non-enrollment during the initial six-month enrollment period, beginning in November.

The Area Agency on Aging 1-B serves Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair and Washtenaw counties. Within the region, there are nearly 368,000 Medicare beneficiaries, Bakk said.

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Teen wounded in stabbing

Friday, August 19, 2005

The Grand Rapids Press

GEORGETOWN TOWNSHIP -- Police said a 15-year-old was in stable condition at Spectrum Health Butterworth Campus after he allegedly was stabbed by a 14-year-old relative in a fight Thursday. Ottawa County sheriff's deputies arrested the 14-year-old, transporting him to the county youth home and charging him with felonious assault in the 2:30 p.m. stabbing. Police did not identify the victim, the assailant or their relationship. The victim was expected to be released today from the hospital.

Ruling Restores Lost Benefits to Immigrants

By NINA BERNSTEIN
The New York Times

Published: August 19, 2005

New York State cannot give low-income people who are elderly, blind and disabled less benefit money just because they are immigrants, even though the federal government has stopped paying its share, a state judge ruled in a decision released yesterday.

The decision restores higher aid payments to thousands of disabled legal immigrants, many of them elderly refugees who were facing eviction after being cut off from federal and state disability benefits because they had not become United States citizens within a seven-year period set by Congress.

"It's a complete and total victory," said Jennifer Baum, a Legal Aid Society lawyer representing some of the plaintiffs, after the ruling by Justice Jane S. Solomon of State Supreme Court in Manhattan. "It's a victory for New York State's constitution and a victory for elderly, frail and disabled immigrants who have been struggling to survive."

New York State will appeal the decision, "because of its severe fiscal impact on the state," said John Madden, a spokesman for the state's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. The office's commissioner, Robert Doar, who is named as a defendant, is still calculating the potential cost, Mr. Madden said.

The coalition of lawyers for the poor who brought the class-action lawsuit last December estimate that the state will owe a total of less than \$1.5 million in retroactive payments to 487 refugees cut off during the last two years, and as much as \$3 million a year for 2,000 refugees likely to reach the cutoff at some point during the next six or seven years, unless Congress extends the aid.

The decision also makes the state liable for providing additional aid to other legal immigrants who are disabled or elderly but now considered for only the lowest level of public assistance, typically \$352 a month. A citizen in the same circumstances receives \$666 monthly, the standard of need set by state law for the disabled. To reach that amount, the state adds \$87 to what the federal government pays in federal Supplemental Security Income, or S.S.I.

That \$314 difference, based only on their not yet being citizens, violates both the federal Constitution's guarantee of equal protection and the state Constitution's requirement that the state help the needy, Justice Solomon wrote, echoing a 2001 decision by New York's highest court that struck down a similar state restriction on nonemergency Medicaid coverage for the immigrant poor.

Since the lawsuit was filed, 10 of the 18 named plaintiffs who are refugees have become citizens and begun receiving their S.S.I. payments, but every month, new cases reach the time limit and are cut off, Ms. Baum said.

To Sura Simonova, 91, a plaintiff in the lawsuit, who is nearly blind and arrived in 1997 as a refugee from Ukraine, news of the victory seemed too good to be true. Mrs. Simonova, who shares a small \$650 Brooklyn apartment with her 69-year-old disabled daughter, was still waiting for her citizenship interview when her S.S.I. benefits were cut off in June 2004. Her daughter, a citizen, continues to get S.S.I. benefits, but they cover just the rent, leaving only \$352 to Mrs. Simonova for other expenses.

"We had a very tough time to survive," Mrs. Simonova said through an interpreter. "My daughter and I didn't have enough food or vitamins, and we could not even run air-conditioning when it was so hot because we didn't have enough money."

Mrs. Simonova passed her citizenship interview in February, but apparently her fingerprints have not yet cleared the Department of Homeland Security - a delay experienced by many applicants, according to Constance Carden, a lawyer with the New York Legal Assistance Group.

The decision brought joy to Sarah Rubin, who said she planned to communicate it to her frail, deaf parents in sign language. They were cut off from their S.S.I. benefits in July.

"They are 73 and 75," she said. "They are in the process of obtaining their citizenship, and it takes so long in New York now, and only because of this they were deprived of everything - all source of living including any money, medical coverage, food stamps, everything."

The state had argued in part that the immigrants had no right to be heard in court because the cutoff was the result of a political decision on benefits reached in Congress. It also contended that the immigrants had no independent right to aid at the level set by the state.

But Justice Solomon rejected that view, saying it would lead to "the perverse result" that the state would be providing extra money to people whose income was too high to qualify for federal S.S.I., while denying it to needier people solely because they were immigrants.

County Collaborative Council combating substance abuse

by Erica Goff
Herald Staff Writer

The Gratiot County Collaborative Council has agreed to act as the local coalition to provide education and combat the issue of substance abuse in the area.

Bill Dilts, prevention coordinator for the Collaborative Council, said substance abuse is a problematic issue in many areas, and Gratiot County is not immune from the issues that go with it. The council wants to directly address the problem on a number of levels, and will do so in the near future with the establishment of the coalition.

"We know it is a problem here. Substance abuse affects people in the work place, in the home and everything that goes on in their lives," he said.

Jan Baszler, director of the Department of Human Services offices in Gratiot and Clinton counties, said the coalition would be a funding and prevention program that is "sorely needed" in the community.

"It is critical that all our service departments have a coordinated plan for such these issues," she said.

Baszler added that many of the child welfare cases within DHS have some component of substance abuse issues within them, and such a coalition would be a new and beneficial development in the area.

"To have a coordinated approach to both education and treatment of substance abuse would be an excellent thing for the community," she said. "It is something we have never had."

The coalition will begin planning regular meetings within the next few weeks, with goals of developing preventative and educational programs to minimize the effects of substance abuse on local residents.

Awareness of the problem and the elements that go with it - such as the effects on children and the downward cycle that such habits often form - will also be addressed, Dilts said.

As it is forming, the coalition

is looking for people in various parts of the community to add different perspectives on the issue, he added.

A full-time facilitator will also be hired to oversee the coalition once it is established.

Things are still in planning stages but progressing quickly, Dilts said.

"We are trying to get things rolling as quickly as possible. We are looking to start meetings in the second week of August," he explained.

Dilts said at least some funding will come from federal grants for which the Collaborative Council has already applied. The group is "well into the process of seeking funding" and expects to receive news of grant status by the end of the month.

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Wayne Briefs

Detroit News staff reports and wire services

Plymouth

Center seeks AmeriCorps volunteers

The Guidance Center is looking for 20 full-time AmeriCorps volunteers to assist with the agency's literacy, after-school, mentoring and therapeutic programs. AmeriCorps members receive a stipend paid every two weeks, health care for full-time members, and child care if qualified. They also are eligible for a \$4,725 education award after a year of service and the possibility of deferred student loans while they are volunteering. For information, call program supervisor Joe Spain at (734) 785-7705, Ext. 7209, or e-mail jspain@guidance-center.org.

Audit: DMB Could Have Save \$3.6M With Card

State departments could save the state a combined \$3.6 million over the last three years if employees used the state-issued "procurement" cards for minor purchases and if the state were more active in working discounts with vendors who would opt to take the card, a state audit reported today.

The procurement card is similar to a state-issued credit card. Last year, 3,561 state employees had one and they were used so state workers weren't forced to run through the tedious process of getting a check every time they needed to make a run for commonly used supplies.

The card's use, however, has declined in recent years and the Auditor General suggested today, that the Department of Management and Budget (DMB) put a greater focus on the card as a way to save the cash-strapped state bureaucracy a little money.

Auditors estimated that about 326,000 vouchers totaling \$107 million were made between Oct. 1, 2001 and May 31, 2004. Apparently, state employees could have used the procurement card for 50 percent of these purchases, which could have saved the state about \$1.1 million. The state could have earned another \$500,000 through additional procurement card rebates.

The state's procurement card program started in June 1995 as a way to cut special deals with vendors and reduce the administrative costs of constantly cutting checks for common state purchases under \$2,500. In May 2004, state departments issued 3,561 of these procurement cards to their employees. The Department of Corrections (DOC) and the Department of Transportation are two bigger users of the state card.

Also, auditors suggested DMB could have saved another \$2 million over a three-year period if it had been more aggressive working discounts with frequently used vendors. Of the 84 times state departments could have established discounts with frequently used vendors, they only seized 10.

"Generally, cardholders did not seize opportunities to obtain more favorable prices for their procurement card purchases," the audit said.

DMB embraced the audit, saying they are expecting to make the suggested changes by Sept. 30, 2005. DMB staff have met with the DOC, State Police and the DMB Acquisition Services on the benefits of using the procurement card. Also, the DMB is developing a plan to negotiate bigger purchasing discounts with the card and letting cardholders know about the savings.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2004, state employees made \$40.5 million in purchases with the cards and received \$475,000 in rebate, which is done from FY 2002, when \$47 million in purchases were made with the card.

The audit noted a handful of instances in which the procurement card purchases were not adequately documented, but no evidence of fraud was discovered. Also, auditors suggested the state routinely cancel the procurement cards of people who rarely use them and take steps to reduce the number of employees who have been issued multiple cards.

Human Services League Blames Engler

This will be like music to Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM**'s ears. The lobbyist for the Michigan League of Human Services (MLHS) said former Gov. John **ENGLER** and previous lawmakers are "responsible" for the budget crunch that Granholm and current legislators are confronting.

"I think that former Gov. Engler and the members of the Legislature who voted to enact those multi-year tax cuts in 1999 have to look at what it's doing to us now," complained MLHS director Sharon **PARKS**.

This is the same theme the Granholm campaign has picked up as it seeks to blame Engler and company for the budget problems she inherited.

Parks, however, had some complaints about Granholm's proposed slices from the state Medicaid budget.

When asked about the status of the so-called social safety net, Parks contended, "It's in shatters. It has been tested for a long time...it will hurt a lot of people who depend on the social safety net."

Parks does not want to see recipients lose eligibility adding, "We can't impose premiums and co-pays on people with very, very marginal incomes."

She said the League is pleased that there is talk about closing \$100 million in tax loopholes with some of the resulting revenues earmarked for Medicaid, but she warns this is not enough.

"We need to look seriously at alternatives to that," Parks said. "We have consistently advocated revenue. Those aren't on the table and they need to be on the table."

Back to the subject of John Engler, Parks figures if the \$3 billion in multiple tax cuts had never been granted, the state budget crisis would not exist.

Asked if Engler was responsible for the problem she said, "Absolutely."

*Contributed by Senior Capital Correspondent Tim **SKUBICK**.*